



Tom Ahern's nine-step communications self-audit

Why pay thousands to have an expert tell you what you're doing wrong? Audit your donor communications yourself, using these criteria.

by Tom Ahern

I audit donor communications for part of my living: websites, newsletters, appeal letters and the like. Then I issue 'report cards' on their effectiveness, based on industry best practices.

Trust me, there is no work more emotionally gratifying than pointing out what's horribly wrong in stuff that other people write. Sheer bliss.

In my audits, I use nine basic criteria, which I've outlined below. To increase giving and retention to their loftiest levels, donor communications *must* be effective in all nine areas. There are many other criteria, incidentally. But these nine cover the fundamentals.

Try a do-it-yourself audit. Take any vital donor communication and judge it against these nine criteria. (If I may suggest? Most nonprofit newsletters are *rank* with shortcomings.) Keep the tissues handy.

Criterion 1

Is the content 'donor-centric'? Does it say, over and over, in different ways: 'With your help, we can do amazing things. And without your help, we can't. It all depends on you.' Example newsletter headline that meets this criterion, 'Your staggering generosity helps thousands of Rhode Island women...'

Criterion 2

Is it entertaining? Does it have the necessary virtues of unexpectedness, simplicity and a conversational tone? Example newsletter headline that meets this criterion,

'Oops: federal tinkering accidentally ends discount birth control, a benefit available to lower-income women and families since 1990.'

Criterion 3

Is urgency part of the message? Does it *strongly* ask the donor to contribute *now*? Be aware: inertia is the *real* enemy in fundraising. Getting someone to 'just do it' – to write the cheque, to go online and give – is the hard part. A sense of urgency helps move people to take action. Example newsletter headline that meets this criterion,

'Donors, get out your cheque books.'

Criterion 4

Does the message somehow talk about, or suggest, the chance of loss? Psychologist Robert Cialdini's famed research, in *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, found that response from your target audience will increase if your message emphasises the chance of loss. He also discovered that the chance of loss is far more persuasive than the promise of gain. Here's an example of 'loss writing' from a recent front page article in the Planned Parenthood of Rhode Island newsletter,

'Donors: You are our only hope, as it turns out. Growth is a wonderful thing. We're thrilled that people use PPRI more than ever. But growth brings with it a perennial problem: finding the money to pay for it all. This year PPRI must raise an extra \$400,000 in gifts to meet surging demand for core programs.'

Where's the loss? It's implied. If PPRI *doesn't* raise that added \$400K, the article hints, it won't be able to meet demand – and the community loses.

Criterion 5

Does it pass the 'you' test? Get out a red pen. Then get out an important donor communication such as an appeal letter or newsletter; or print out your website's home page. Apply red pen to paper. Each time the word *you* appears – in any of its forms (*yours, you'll*) – circle it. Good donor communications will look like they have the measles.

You is the most powerful (and warmest) word in advertising. (If you're turning your nose up, please note: technically speaking, fundraising communications are just advertising by another name.) Frequent repetition of the word *you* keeps readers involved. While *infrequent* use leaves readers cold.

Criterion #6:

Is the communication built for browsing? Particularly, are the headlines effective?

People don't read *deeply* most of the time. They browse. It's the only way to deal with the information glut that frustrates us all. I digest four major newspapers a day, all in about 30 minutes. How? I read just headlines. I only dig in if I find something of special interest to me.

The day when you could reasonably hope people would read an article with a weak headline are long over. Websites – which are built for skimming –

hastened the day's demise. If your communications do not cater for skimmers, browsers, flippers, and clickers, you're not playing in the right game.

You should be able to read a headline and its subhead (which work together as a unit) and know exactly what the gist of the story is. If you're at all puzzled, then the headline's a failure. Failed headlines are the number one reason why donors do not respond to newsletters.

Criterion 7

Is it convenient to respond to offers? Again, it's all about inertia. Make your offers easy to respond to, and more people will. Example,

'Do you want to do more? Sign up for monthly giving online now!'

Criterion 8

Is there accomplishment reporting? For instance, what are your results? This is the one thing donors care about: 'How did I change the world by sending you a cheque?' At least a third of every donor newsletter should talk about results.

Criterion 9

Are there credibility builders? In other words, does every communication help establish the donor's trust in you? Trust and results are the two things donors value most, according to 2007 research conducted by the Cone Company. Nothing new there, incidentally; it has always been so. But with the proliferation of nonprofits -- their numbers rose more than 35 per cent in the last decade -- and frequent reports in the media of fraud, misuse and poor financial controls (a 2006 Villanova study found that 85 per cent of Roman Catholic dioceses had discovered embezzlement in the last five years), donors' scepticism has flourished.

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